

Individual Psychology

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Individual psychology is a term used specifically to refer to the psychological method or science founded by the Viennese psychiatrist Alfred Adler (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2002). The English edition of Adler's work on the subject (1925) is a collection of papers and lectures given mainly in 1912-1914, and covers the whole range of human psychology in a single survey, intended to mirror the indivisible unity of the personality.

The concept of "individual psychology" was formulated in the process in which Adler broke away from the psychoanalytic school of Sigmund Freud (Dinkmeyer, Pew, & Dinkmeyer, 1979). In this development, Adler did call his work "free psychoanalysis" for a time, but he later rejected the label of "psychoanalyst" (Hoffman, 1994). His method, involving a holistic approach to the study of character (Mosak & DiPietro, 2006), has been extremely influential in later 20th century counselling and psychiatric strategies (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

The term "individual psychology" can also be used more generally to refer to what is more commonly known as differential psychology, or the psychology of individual differences. Usage of this term is likely to imply a more individualistic focus than is found in mainstream psychology of individual differences, where there is frequently a bias towards nomothetic research.

The term differentiates Adler's approach entirely from Völkerpsychologie (Social psychology), the culminating thesis of Wilhelm Wundt down to 1920.

Adler's psychology

Adler shifted the grounds of psychological determinance from sex and libido, the Freudian standpoint, to environmental factors. He gave special prominence to societal factors. According to him a person has to combat or confront three forces: societal, love-related, and vocational forces. These confrontations determine the final nature of a personality. Adler based his theories on the pre-adulthood development of a person. He laid stress on such areas as hated children, physical deformities at birth, birth order, etc.

Adlerian psychology shows parallels with the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow, who acknowledged Adler's influence on his own theories. Both individual psychology and humanistic psychology hold that the individual human being is the best determinant of his or her own needs, desires, interests, and growth.

The theory of compensation, defeat and over-compensation

According to Adler, an individual derives his personality traits from these essentially external factors. The character of the individual is formed by his responses to their influence in the following ways:

Compensation

Whenever a person suffers from any disadvantages that make him or her inferior to others, his or her main aim becomes to bring those disadvantages to an end. Those who are able to do this become successful in their lives on both social as well as individual bases.

Resignation

There are those who give in to their disadvantages and become reconciled to them. Such people are in the majority. The attitude of the world towards them is of a cool, rather uninterested sympathy.

Over-compensation

There are some persons who become so infatuated with the idea of compensating for their disadvantages that they end up over-indulging in the pursuit. These are the neurotics.

Thus, the external factors are vital in character formation.

Adler's views are not only refreshing but are now an indispensable part of all psychiatric treatments and therapies. Examples of psychologists and therapists who could be called "individual psychologists" in the sense of being Adlerian include Rudolf Dreikurs and Henry Stein.